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**SOME UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF
INTENTION TO QUIT**

David E. Bowen

**Research Report No. 81-3
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Some Unintended Consequences of Intention to Quit^{1,2}

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²Portions of this paper were presented at the Midwest Academy of Management, 24th Annual Meeting, 1981.

Some Unintended Consequences of Intention to Quit

This paper analyzes the situation of employees who intend to quit, but do not, to see if intention to quit can be useful in explaining job behaviors other than quitting. Absenteeism and being fired are suggested as unintended consequences of intention to quit. The relationship between these unintended consequences and job performance is also examined. The analysis is guided by the theoretical premises of Mobley's models of the employee turnover process [Mobley, 1977; Mobley, Horner & Hollingsworth, 1978] and the author's model of job search as a two-cycle process.

The psychology of the withdrawal process has received considerable attention since Porter and Steers [1973] underscored its relevance for understanding the turnover decision. The relationship between intention to quit and quitting has been the focus of much of this attention. Mobley and his associates [Mobley, 1977; Mobley, Horner & Hollingsworth, 1978] present a model in which intention to quit immediately precedes quitting. A test of a simplified version of Mobley's model [Mobley et al., 1978] found a significant correlation ($r = .49$) between intention to quit and quitting. This finding supported earlier intention-quitting

research [as reviewed by Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979] and has, itself, been subsequently supported [e.g., Hom, Katerberg & Hulin, 1979; Miller, Katerberg & Hulin, 1979]. In brief, efforts to expand our knowledge of the withdrawal process by establishing a tie between employees intending to quit and employees quitting have been successful.

It is the purpose of this paper to analyze the situation of employees who intend to quit, but do not. That these employees "exist" is certainly one explanation for intention to quit-quit correlations falling far short of 1.00 (e.g., $r = .49$). Given this situation, the question becomes: can intention to quit be a useful variable in explaining job behaviors other than quitting? I think it can. This paper will explore the consequences of intention to quit by considering: (1) why an employee who intends to quit, does not; (2) the manner in which intention to quit can produce absenteeism and being fired as unintended consequences, and (3) how the job performance of employees intending to quit may be affected by their absenteeism and may affect their being fired.

Unintended Consequences of Intention

to Quit: Proposed Relationships

The relationships between intention to quit-absenteeism (I/Q-A) and intention to quit-being fired (I/Q-F) are suggested to be the following:

I/Q-A: There will be a positive correlation for I/Q-A.

The strength of this correlation will be moderated by:

(1) whether or not absenteeism and quitting can serve a common purpose for the employee, in which case a correlation between absenteeism and quitting is to be expected, and (2) whether or not the absenteeism is under the control of the employee.

I/Q-F: There will be a positive, but small, correlation for I/Q-F. The size of the I/Q-F correlation will depend on the relationship between I/Q and job performance. In turn, the relationship between I/Q and job performance will be affected by: (1) the relationship between absenteeism and job performance, (2) the degree of control the employee can exercise over job performance, and (3) the degree to which the employee's job performance is visible to potential other employers.

Theoretical Background

A brief review of the theory underpinning the I/Q-Q turnover models by Mobley [1977] and Mobley et al. [1978] will be useful in analyzing these proposed relationships. Mobley acknowledges three earlier models as having guided his own efforts.

March & Simon [1958] modeled turnover as the outcome of the interaction between "perceived desirability of movement from the organization" and "perceived ease of movement from the

organization." However, subsequent turnover research has tended to consider only the first variable of this model and to ignore the second. Mobley's [1977] original turnover model is unique in explicitly recognizing the important role played by perceived ease of movement in the turnover process. This concept will also play a significant part in accounting for employees who intend to quit, but do not.

Fishbein's [1967] model of attitudes, intentions and behavior stated that the best predictor of a given behavior should be the individual's intention to engage in that behavior. The moderators of the relationship between intention and behavior include: (1) the degree to which the measures of behavioral intention and behavior correspond in their level of specificity, (2) the stability of the intention (e.g., over time), and (3) the extent to which realization of the intention is under the person's volitional control [Horn et al., 1979]. These three moderators determine how well intention to quit can predict quitting. They will also be useful in considering whether intention to quit might have some unintended consequences.

Locke's [1968] task motivation model theorizes that the most immediate motivational determinant of task performance and individual choice is an individual's conscious goal or intention. In this context, intention to quit is appropriately presented as the most immediate cause of quitting.

However, Locke also maintains that not every intention leads to the end specified by the intention:

It may be instructive in this context to discuss . . . types of "unintentional" behavior that occur . . . to see to what degree these might be explained in terms of conscious intent. The key point to recognize . . . is that all the actions in question . . . were or could be set in motion by a conscious goal or intention. In addition, the results or outcomes of the behaviors are ordinarily the ones intended or are correlated with those intended (the size of the correlation depending upon the individual's capacity, knowledge, ability, and the situation) [emphasis added; 1968, pp. 159-161].

Thus, an examination of possible correlations between quitting and other job behaviors might suggest additional consequences of intention to quit, even though they may be "unintended." Furthermore, the strength of these relationships will be moderated by the individual employee's situation, ability, etc. In sum, Locke, as well as Fishbein and March & Simon, provides useful theoretical direction for exploring the job behaviors of employees who intend to quit, but do not.

Why Employees Who Intend to Quit, Do Not:

The Role of Two-Cycle Job Search

Although there are numerous explanations for why an employee who intends to quit does not (e.g., resistance to change, fear of "what others might think"), only the inability to obtain an attractive job offer will be considered here. It is particularly relevant to an I/Q-Q model and clearly establishes a group of "I/Q-non-quitters" whose job behaviors are the focus of this paper.

Employees who intend to quit but are unable to obtain an attractive job offer may decide not to quit. This conclusion sets well intuitively, but does it fit with Mobley's I/Q-Q model? Mobley's [1977] model specifies the sequence of search for alternatives, evaluation of them, and finally, comparison of alternatives leading to one's intention to quit. If this sequence represents obtaining an attractive job offer, then Mobley's model is saying employees know they have an attractive job offer before intending to quit. Consequently, obtaining an attractive job offer could not be considered later in the model as a moderator of I/Q-Q that "creates nonquitters."

Mobley's [1977] model does not, however, include employee consideration of actual job offers. His model deals with job search among potentially available alternatives, not among actual job offers. In this regard, it is true to its theoretical origin--the "perceived ease of movement" concept [March & Simon, 1958]. The

relevant distinction here is one between what can be viewed as two cycles of job search. In the first cycle, the employee searches and assesses the perceived availability of "greener pastures," i.e., considering whether or not there are other jobs potentially available. In the second cycle, the employee searches and assesses the accessibility of those "greener pastures," i.e., receiving or not receiving a job offer. The first cycle is included in Mobley's model and precedes intention to quit, but the second cycle is not.

The ordering of a two-cycle job search process helps explain why I/Q-Q correlations are not higher. Employees intending to quit have not completed the second cycle. Upon doing so, some employees may be unable to obtain an attractive offer and, consequently, not quit. Stated in terms of the Fishbein model, since realization of the intention to quit is not under the employee's volitional control, intention to quit cannot always predict quitting. However, assuming that this employee sustains an intention to quit, there are some unintended consequences that can be expected.

Absenteeism as an Unintended Consequence of Intention to Quit

There will be a strong correlation for I/Q-A if: (1) absenteeism and quitting can serve a common purpose for the employee and, therefore, a correlation between absenteeism and quitting is to be expected, and (2) the absenteeism is under the control of the employee.

Considering the first moderator, the importance of an absenteeism-quitting correlation for an I/Q-A correlation follows from Locke's [1968] point that the behavioral consequences of an intention are ordinarily the ones intended or are correlated with those intended. In the present context, then, there will be a strong I/Q-A correlation for employees if: (a) there are situations in which quitting and absenteeism are correlated, and (b) employees who intend to quit, but do not, find themselves in those situations.

With respect to (a) above, Mobley [1980] suggested several situations in which absenteeism and quitting would be expected to be correlated because they would represent a common withdrawal process. This was seen by Mobley as most probable when: the consequences of absenteeism and quitting have high commonality, e.g., both serve to accomodate non-work roles or values; absenteeism represents avoidance of a dissatisfying or stressful job and alternative jobs are available; and an employee is absent to engage in job search. These situations, especially the latter two, in turn yield (b) above, since they could describe employees who intend to quit, are unable to obtain an attractive job offer, but continue second cycle job search. In other words, although the employees intend to quit, absenteeism is an unintended consequence and, therefore, there is a strong I/Q-A correlation.

The Fishbein model provides another basis for predicting absenteeism from intention to quit in situations where absenteeism

and quitting can be expected to be correlated. These situations, e.g., when an employee is absent to engage in job search [Mobley, 1980], present a view of absenteeism as a precursor of quitting on the withdrawal behavior continuum [Herzberg, Mausner, Peterson & Capwell, 1957]. Specifically, this view sees the employee as "quitting for a day" when absent. Given this view of "functional equivalence" between quitting and absenteeism, the Fishbein model supports predicting absenteeism from intention to quit since the model predicts actual behavior from intended behavior based largely on the level of correspondence between the two.

The second moderating variable in I/Q-A is the employee's ability to control absenteeism. The employees' control over their absenteeism will be influenced by whether or not their work situation has strong penalties for being absent, e.g., loss of pay, poor performance reviews, etc. In the face of such penalties, employees may decide they are simply unable to be absent, even if they have desires or intentions to withdraw from the job. Studies have confirmed the fact that the constraints of the employee's situation can moderate the strength of the relationship between job attitudes and absenteeism [e.g., Herman, 1973; Smith, 1977].

The role played by the employee's ability to control absenteeism in moderating I/Q-A is most clearly evident in the extreme case where employees decide they are entirely unable to be absent. Obviously, if a highly constrained situation results in no absenteeism, there is no I/Q-A. In sum, an I/Q-A correlation is suggested

for situations where absenteeism and quitting can serve a common purpose for employees, given that employees can control their absenteeism in those situations.

A consideration of the situation where absenteeism and quitting can not serve a common purpose for the employee completes the picture of I/Q-A. The situations Mobley [1980] cited as examples when correlations between absenteeism and quitting are not expected include: when the consequences of quitting and being absent have little in common; when absenteeism is a spontaneous or impulsive act; and when quitting is a function of the positive attraction of an alternative job rather than escape, avoidance, or withdrawal from an unsatisfying or stressful current job. In these situations, absenteeism and quitting are independent behaviors, not simply alternative manifestations of a common withdrawal process. Consequently, there is not the commonality between absenteeism and quitting that both the Locke and Fishbein models require as support for predicting absenteeism from intention to quit.

I/Q-A: Strong or Weak?

This discussion of I/Q-A does not, unfortunately, lead to a conclusion as to whether strong or weak I/Q-A correlations are the more likely. This would depend on a number of factors, including: (1) which combination of the moderating variables prevails, (2) the time lag between measuring intention to quit and measuring absenteeism and quitting (this involves whether the intention to quit is stable over time, the probability of ultimately obtaining an

attractive job offer, etc.), and (3) whether employees who intend to quit and have not obtained an attractive job offer may quit anyway if unemployment insurance is available, etc. Even this abbreviated list of considerations makes it impossible to establish a "typical" I/Q-A correlation.

Being Fired as an Unintended Consequence
of Intention to Quit

The small positive correlation expected for I/Q-F assumes that job performance may suffer once employees intend to quit, and that this declining job performance can lead to being fired. Whether or not this occurs depends upon a number of conditions. Three of the most relevant are considered here.

Employee Ability to Control Job Performance

If employees intending to quit are performing tasks where they have a great deal of control over their productivity, then I/Q may lead to lower job performance. This is consistent with Herman's [1973] findings that a relationship between job attitudes and job performance can be expected when the employee's work is relatively unstructured and free of external constraints. She mentions outdoor advertising salesmen, insurance agents, piece rate workers, and bus and truck drivers as examples of employees where poor job attitudes, when present, might result in lowered performance. The job dissatisfaction of the employee who intends to quit could be expected to lead to poorer job performance, given a similar

working situation. Actually, since the employee who intends to quit also has the perception acquired in first cycle job search that there are greener pastures available, s/he may view the present work situation as all the more free of constraints. This perception would further increase the likelihood of a relationship between I/Q and lowered job performance, the latter possibly leading to being fired.

Visibility of Job Performance to Potential Employers¹

If the job performance of employees who intend to quit is visible to potential employers, their intention to quit may actually lead to an increase in job performance. An example best illustrates this condition. A university professor may intend to quit because of dissatisfaction with the present job and perceived greener pastures elsewhere. The work situation for the professor is in the unstructured category just described where a relationship between I/Q and lowered job performance could be expected. However, the success of second cycle job search for an attractive job offer will depend, in large measure, on the professor's job performance remaining constant or even improving. This is because the professor's job performance, as measured by publications, for example, is easily visible to potential employers. Thus, even though the professor intends to quit, job performance is unlikely to decline. In fact,

¹I thank John Wanous for his insight on this point.

it might even increase if the professor believes an attractive job offer is contingent upon improved job performance.

The Relationship between Absenteeism and Performance

Since absenteeism can be an unintended consequence of I/Q, it must be determined whether this absenteeism leads to lower job performance. Findings by Staw & Oldham [1978] suggest that absenteeism, when it is an unintended consequence of I/Q, would probably not diminish job performance, and might even enhance it.

The condition of "psychological incompatibility" between the employee and the job that Staw & Oldham [1978] found produced a positive relationship between absenteeism and performance can be expected to characterize employees who are absent as an unintended consequence of I/Q. Staw & Oldham define employees as being in psychologically incompatible situations when their jobs do not provide opportunities they value and highly desire. For these employees, absenteeism serves predominantly a maintenance function that may increase their ability to cope and perform on the job. The employee who intends to quit, but is instead absent, is very likely also an employee who is psychologically incompatible with his/her work. This seems probable given that the situations in which I/Q-A is expected include when absenteeism represents avoidance of a dissatisfying or stressful job and when the employee is absent to engage in job search. Consequently, absenteeism may serve a maintenance function for employees who intend to quit that results in their job performance remaining constant or even improving.

Predicting I/Q-F

The interaction of these three conditions (employee ability to control job performance, visibility of job performance to potential employers, and the relationship between absenteeism and performance) suggests a small positive correlation for I/Q-F. Consider the outdoor salesperson who is able, in terms of the work situation, to express an I/Q in lower job performance. In the initial stages of second cycle job search, the salesperson may maintain his/her previous performance level since potential employers can easily "see" the resulting sales record and hold him/her personally responsible. However, if second cycle job search continues to be unsuccessful, job attitudes could come to dominate job performance. This would particularly be the case if the salesperson began to think the real solution was not to just change jobs, but to change careers. If this were the case, s/he would be less concerned about maintaining a good, visible sales record. The salesperson's declining job performance could lead to being fired.

Other scenarios could be presented in which I/Q leads to being fired as an unintended consequence. However, the moderators seem to suggest that intention to quit would only infrequently lead to declining job performance and being fired.

A concluding point of insight on the I/Q-F relationship is derived from the Locke and Fishbein models. Overall, these models offer little support for predicting being fired from an intention

to quit. The commonality between behaviors the models require for predicting the one from an intention to do the other is largely missing. However, quitting and being fired do have withdrawal from the organization in common. In this vein, one can conceptualize I/Q as an intention to withdraw which, in turn, may lead to being fired as the resulting withdrawal behavior. This linkage "creates in theory" the possibility of employees who: intend to quit, then perform their jobs poorly, and are fired as a "consequence." These employees can be viewed as victims of an ironic self-fulfilling prophecy in which an intention to withdraw sets in motion employee actions that do, indeed, result in withdrawal--but the withdrawal comes from being fired, not by quitting. In sum, the two models support predicting a positive, but small, correlation for I/Q-F.

Concluding Remarks

This paper considered the behavior of employees who intend to quit, but do not. It appears that the intention to quit, itself, can provide useful clues as to how these employees will behave. A number of relationships were proposed stating just what these clues might tell us about employee absenteeism, job performance and firings. Research on these proposed relationships would be an appropriate starting point for thoroughly exploring the important issues of what happens to the employee who intends to quit, but does not. This research should, at a minimum, address two

considerations not covered in this paper, but that are relevant to predicting the consequences of intention to quit.

First, individual difference variables will certainly moderate the relationships proposed for I/Q-A and I/Q-F. For example, employees with a high need for achievement or strong work ethic values may very likely continue to attend work and maintain their job performance despite an intention to quit. Another relevant variable might be the employee's level of self-esteem as s/he undertakes second cycle job search. As Steers & Mowday [1979] note, the employee may experience decreased self-esteem as a result of his or her failure to find another job. Furthermore, this decreased self-esteem may ultimately influence performance on the job [Korman, 1977], which, in turn, could lead to being fired. Both the employee's need for achievement and self-esteem could be relevant variables in predicting, for example, whether or not the unsuccessful second cycle job search of the earlier discussed outdoor salesperson would indeed lead to declining job performance and being fired. Certainly there are other variables upon which employees differ that will affect their behavior in situations where they intend to quit, but do not.

Finally, additional unintended consequences of intention to quit should be assessed. The present analysis focused on absenteeism and being fired and the relationship of each to job performance. These behaviors, like quitting, are relatively easy to observe and,

therefore, represent a convenient starting point for identifying unintended consequences of intention to quit. However, other possible unintended consequences, be they less obvious behaviors or only psychological machinations, need to be considered also.

The examination by Steers & Mowday [1979] of "dissatisfied stayers" within organizations suggests some additional unintended consequences of intention to quit. For example, they mention that employees may turn to forms of withdrawal such as alcoholism or drugs when other means of withdrawal are unavailable [Staw & Oldham, 1978].

More generally, Steers & Mowday suggest that reactance theory and the learned helplessness model [Wortman & Brehm, 1976] may be useful in analyzing the situation of employees who are dissatisfied with the job but unable to leave it due to the lack of alternatives. From the perspective of reactance theory, Steers & Mowday [1979] predict that these "dissatisfied stayers" will intensify and continue their job search behavior as a way to reassert their freedom of action. If these employees must be absent to intensify their job search, then the dynamics of reactance theory further support the possibility that absenteeism may be an unintended consequence of intention to quit. However, if these "dissatisfied stayers" are unable to be absent, then the learned helplessness model can suggest how employees might respond to this uncontrollable outcome of being trapped in the organization. For example, employees in this

situation may experience decreased self-confidence and self-esteem [Steers & Mowday, 1979]. The possibility of these outcomes, e.g., alcoholism, heightened search activity, decreased self-confidence, etc., emphasize the need to identify other unintended consequences of I/Q in addition to absenteeism, changes in job performance, and being fired.

In sum, I suggest that research on the unintended consequences of intention to quit will, in general terms, enhance our understanding of the psychology of the withdrawal process and, more specifically, increase our awareness of what happens to employees who intend to quit, but do not.

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